

Tokyo 2020 organizers warn of no-fan Olympics as COVID cases rise

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Overseas travelling fans were banned months ago as too great a risk [Reuters]

Tokyo, July 2 (RHC)-- Tokyo Olympics organizers have warned that they are prepared to hold the Games behind closed doors as virus cases rise, leaving ticket-holders in limbo just three weeks before the opening ceremony.

Seiko Hashimoto, president of the Tokyo 2020 organising committee, said on Friday that banning all fans from the Olympics is still an option with the Games opening during a pandemic.

Friday's announcement would be a reversal of a decision spelled out 10 days ago by the organisers to allow up to 10,000 fans to attend. Overseas travelling fans were banned months ago as too great a risk.

The possible about-face is being forced by rising new infections in Tokyo, the appearance of the rapidly spreading Delta variant, and fears that the Olympics and Paralympics with 15,400 athletes and tens of thousands of others entering Japan could turn into a super-spreader event.

"The situation of infection changes and how it will be is still unclear," Hashimoto said in a Friday briefing. "But from Tokyo 2020's perspective, we also include an option of not having spectators."

Yet another decision on fans could be announced next week after a meeting of the International Olympic Committee, local organisers, the Japanese government, Tokyo metropolitan government officials and the International Paralympic Committee.

The government's top COVID-19 adviser, Dr Shigeru Omi, has said repeatedly that the safest option is without any fans. And Yuriko Koike, the governor of Tokyo, suggested on Friday that has been her preference, too. "We will continue to closely watch the infection situation and think what would be best, and mainly consider no spectators," Koike said.

Koike was speaking at a briefing after being hospitalised for more than a week with what was described as "severe fatigue." She denied she was hospitalised for COVID-19, and said she tested negative. Koike also repeated that all Tokyo legs of the torch relay would be taken off public roads until July 16, except those on remote Tokyo islands.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga also said that the option of empty venues was still being considered. "I have made clear that having no spectators is a possibility," Suga said Thursday.

The decision on fans announced last week would allow all outdoor and indoor venues to accommodate up to 50 percent of capacity, but not to exceed 10,000. Toshiro Muto, the CEO of the Tokyo organising committee, said thousands of officials, sponsors, Olympic dignitaries and others holding tickets would be allowed to enter venues, over and above any limits for spectators.

He said they were not "technically" classed as fans, but rather as "organisers." Estimates suggest the IOC could lose between \$3bn and \$4bn in broadcast income were the Olympics to be cancelled.

The official cost of the Olympics is \$15.4 billion, although government audits suggest it is much higher. All but \$6.7 billion is public money. The IOC contributes a total of about \$1.5 billion.

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